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ABSTRACT

There are currently three popular models of exploratory programs in middle level schools: (1) traditional exploratory courses (art, music, industrial arts); (2) elective mini-courses (newspapers, environmental issues, video productions); and (3) integration of exploratory opportunities within the core curriculum (relating a single topic to social studies, language arts, mathematics, etc.). This study surveyed middle level schools in South Carolina to determine which of these three models is most prevalent. A 22-item questionnaire was returned by 63 of 180 South Carolina schools enrolling sixth and/or seventh graders. Sixty of the respondents indicated they had some sort of exploratory program in place. Findings indicated that the state's middle level schools continue to offer, with the greatest frequency, traditional exploratory programs. These programs, with an average number of 25 students and an average length of 50 minutes daily, are typically taught throughout the day. The majority of these classes are taught by teachers hired specifically for the course, and last from 3 to 9 weeks. Most exploratory teachers are not able to select which classes they will teach, whereas most students are able to choose which classes they will take. An overwhelming majority of reporting faculties have made the effort to improve their school's exploratory program by attending workshops, presentations, and visiting other schools with exploratory programs. Findings suggested that South Carolina middle level schools define and recognize exploratory classes when they can be classified as separate; it was concluded that these schools need to continue to place more emphasis on integrating exploration within the core curriculum. (HTH)

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South Carolina Middle School's Exploratory Programs: A Research Report

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South Carolina Middle School's Exploratory Programs : A Research Report

Young adolescents are innately curious with a real desire to explore their worlds. Responsive middle schools often capitalize upon this natural curiosity with exploratory programs in their curriculum. There are currently three popular models of exploratory programs that can exist in middle level schools. The three exploratory program models are: 1) The traditional exploratory courses (e. g., art, chorus, band, industrial arts); 2) The elective mini-courses (e. g., newspapers, environmental issues, video productions); 3) The integration of exploratory opportunities within the core curriculum (e. g., the topic of Diversity and how it relates to social studies, language arts, mathematics, science, music, and art). This study was designed to survey middle level schools in South Carolina about their current exploratory offerings.

Opportunity for students to explore in the curriculum is not a new idea for middle level schools. In the 1920's the National Education's Department of Superintendents listed fifteen purposes of the junior high school. The first purpose listed was to meet individual differences in students, while the second purpose listed was prevocational training and exploration (Van Til, Vars, & Lounsbury, 1967). As the middle school concept evolved, the exploratory programs were considered an essential component. However, their exact role in the middle school has been and continues to be defined and redefined.

Many educators still see exploration as a limited responsibility of special courses so labeled (Compton & Hawn, 1993). However, a current movement within the middle level school is a fully integrated curriculum, including exploratory programs. This study was conducted to see which of the three models of exploratory programs is the most prevalent

in South Carolina middle level schools.

The Sample

A 22-item questionnaire was mailed to all schools that enrolled sixth and/or seventh graders in South Carolina as identified by their grade span in the 1996-97 South Carolina Public Education Directory. The sample size was 180. The return number was 63 or 33%. The data were collated and reported in various categories.

The Results

The majority of schools (62%) reporting contain grades six through eight with the student population ranging from a low of 172 to a high of 2880. Sixty of the respondents said they have some sort of exploratory program in place, while three indicated they had no such program. Table 1 identifies the percent and type of exploratory programming within the respondent schools, with the traditional exploratory course offerings clearly the predominant type.

The majority of schools (95%) reporting indicate that some type of exploratory programming has been a part of the school curriculum for more than three years. The most influential factors for including an exploratory program in the school curriculum are reported in Table 2. The predominant reasons include state mandate, middle level education literature, the superintendent and the principal of the school. Many schools reported multiple responses to this question, indicating that more than one constituency influenced the decision to include such activities in the overall program.

An important factor influencing success in exploratory curriculum is the degree to which faculty receive adequate staff development training, as well as witness actual exploratory programming in day-to-day operation. In 82% of the schools reporting,

faculty experienced exploratory programs in other schools first hand. Additionally, 88% of the schools reported that faculty had attended workshops, presentations, or conferences in the past two years which dealt with exploratory programs.

Staff involvement in exploratory programming is another factor critical to success. Only 8% of the schools reported that all staff were actively involved in the exploratory curriculum. Seventy-five percent of the reporting schools indicated that they had specific teachers hired to teach the exploratory classes.

In 93% of the schools, exploratory classes were a required component of each school's curriculum. Interestingly, 37% of the schools indicated that its staff enjoyed the option to select which exploratory course they wished to teach. On the other hand, 62% of the schools allowed students to select which exploratory course experiences they wished to participate in. In 48% of the schools, exploratory classes tend to have average enrollments of 25 students. Five schools reported that enrollment exceeds 30 students in some exploratory courses.

In light of the movement toward integrating the concept of exploration into the entire curricular offerings of the middle grades school, it is interesting that 60% of the schools reported that exploratory programming occurs throughout the entire school day, five days per week. As shown in Table 3, the number of weeks per year in which such programming is offered runs from three to more than eighteen. The number of minutes per day during which exploratory programming is scheduled ranges from approximately 40 minutes per session to more than 90 minutes. Fifty minutes per session (63%) appears to be the norm, however.

An important component of any exploratory experience is the opportunity to

extend such learning beyond the immediate classroom and/or he regularly scheduled exploratory time. In 28% of the schools, teachers and students enjoy the option to do this, while 72% of the schools do not have the opportunity to extend exploratory program activities beyond the regularly scheduled classroom time. Another important aspect of exploratory programming is evaluating the experience. Table 4 reports the number and type of evaluation used in schools included in the survey. The majority being either "numerical average" or "letter grade."

In view of the literature supporting such programming, we are happy to report that exploratory programming is a primary function of the middle school. Even though most of these schools contain "traditional exploratory course based programs" there is a clear commitment to the concept of exploration and its relationship to early adolescence. And, as one might expect, the attitude of those involved in exploratory programming (e. g. students, staff, parents, and the general public) is overwhelmingly favorable (88%).

Major problems challenging the development and implementation of exploratory programs include scheduling, lack of variety of course offerings, personnel, facilities, student apathy, lack of sufficient funding, meeting state mandates, and finally, lack of resources. In spite of these constraints, most of the reported South Carolina Middle grades schools make a concerted effort to provide some exploratory curriculum to students.

Conclusions

The picture of exploratory programs as painted by the data reveals a rather variegated exploratory landscape. Clearly, there exists in the state wide distinctions as to what constitutes good exploratory curriculum. Among the conclusions one may draw

from the data is that South Carolina's middle level schools continue to offer, with the greatest frequency, traditional exploratory programs.

These exploratory programs, with an average number of 25 students and an average length of 50 minutes daily, are typically taught throughout the day. The majority of exploratory classes is taught by specifically hired exploratory teachers and last from three to nine weeks. Most exploratory teachers are not able to select which classes they will teach while the majority of students are able to select which exploratory classes they will take. It appears that students' and faculty's interests, along with state mandates supported by middle grades educational literature, has the greatest influence in regard to including an exploratory program in middle level schools. However, an overwhelming majority of the reporting middle grades faculties have made the effort to improve their school's exploratory program by attending workshops, presentations, and visiting other schools with successful exploratory programs.

Based on the data gathered for this study, it appears that middle level schools in South Carolina define and recognize exploratory classes when they can be classified as separate classes (e. g., band, art, foreign language). These separate exploratory classes are often viewed as requiring special facilities, specialized teachers for subject matter knowledge, and special grouping to facilitate the experience.

However, while it is important to continue to offer these separate exploratory classes, middle grades schools need to continue to place more emphasis on integrating exploration within the core curriculum. Teachers should tap into young adolescents' natural curiosity to explore within the curriculum. For example topics such as music, art, and foreign language could be studied and explored within content courses such as social

studies (Allen & Stevens, 1994). If students show a special interest in jazz while studying the Roaring Twenties, then the students should be encouraged to explore and study the topic in greater detail. "If exploration is a valid concept, then we must be concerned that ALL Aspects of the middle school are exploratory. Given the state of curriculum planning in middle level schools, it is obvious that this expanded vision of what exploration can be does not yet exist" (Brazee, 1987).

Exploratory programs are very important for the young adolescent and should be encouraged within middle level schools. According to this study, the middle level schools in South Carolina continue to implement and improve an exploratory program which is important to the success of a middle school. The information gathered in this study will provide a base to compare future studies on exploratory programs in middle grades schools, not only in South Carolina, but in other states as well (Allen & Warren, 1994, 1994a).

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TABLE 1
PERCENT AND TYPE OF EXPLORATORY PROGRAMS*

Description	Traditional Exploratory Courses	Elective Mini- Courses	Exploratory Activities Integrated	Other
TOTAL	97%	8%	5%	3%

* Some schools have multiple types of exploratory programs.

TABLE 2
FACTORS INFLUENCING EXPLORATORY PROGRAM DEVELOPMENT*

Factors	State Mandate	Board of Education	Superinten dent & Central Office Faculty	Faculty	Students	Parents	Middle Level Education Literature	Principal
TOTAL	35%	8%	10%	8%	10%	4%	37%	15%

* Multiple responses possible

TABLE 3

EXPLORATORY PROGRAM SCHEDULING WEEKS PER YEAR

Number of Weeks	0-2	3-6	7-9	10-18	18+
TOTAL	0	6%	43%	40%	33%

TABLE 4

EVALUATING STUDENT PERFORMANCE IN EXPLORATORY PROGRAMS

Description	Numerical Average	Letter Grade	Satisfactory/Unsatisfactory	Complete/Incomplete
TOTAL	58%	40%	13%	0